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Food fit for a queen

Churchill chef's approach wins royal reception

By Ron Mikulak
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The Courier-Journal

When Queen Elizabeth II visits Churchill Downs on Saturday for the Kentucky Derby, Gil Logan, executive chef of Levy Restaurants at the Downs, will feel doubly honored.

First, to be serving the queen.

Second, because she's going to eat what he cooks.

"When it was decided that they'd be visiting the Derby and eating here, the queen's staff Googled me," Logan said. "The royal family prefers to eat organic, natural foods, and they travel with their own food service staff.



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Gil Logan, executive chef at Levy Restaurants at Churchill Downs, juggled Kentucky-grown tomatoes, which are among the ingredients he uses year-round. He favors locally grown ingredients. (By Kylene Lloyd, The Courier-Journal)



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"But when they saw that I buy as much as I can from local farmers who are growing and raising food without pesticides or hormones or antibiotics, they were quite happy to eat from our regular menu."

That menu was worked out last June, before the queen decided to visit the Derby this year.

Planning a year ahead gives Logan the opportunity to locate providers of the ingredients he wants. "I want to make all my dishes work together as a harmonious menu," he said. "When I think I have those ideas worked out, then I go out to talk to farmers to see if they can provide what we need."

Since he assumed the position of executive chef at Churchill Downs about four years ago, Logan has been an ardent supporter of Kentucky Proud, the initiative of the state Agriculture Department to develop stable markets for Kentucky-produced food.

"Kentucky Proud was able to source all the organic foods I needed," Logan said.

"I get the limestone Bibb lettuce from George Gagel farm right here in south Louisville," Logan explained. "I'll be using Kenny's Country Cheese in the cheese tray, his Kentucky blue cheese, and his St. Jerome, a soft-ripened cheese sort of like Brie."

"I get excellent Rebekah Grace's hydroponic tomatoes all year around from Wyatt Farms in Marshall County near Paducah. I'll be serving beef from the Green River Cattle Co."

Using these local ingredients, Logan will offer dishes with a wide range of tastes.

"I like my dishes to have layers of flavor," he said.

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ON THE MENU

The choices on the buffets on the terrace and suites levels at Churchill Downs will be extensive, and the Queen of England will be choosing from these dishes, among others:

Barbecued shrimp sautéed with Levy signature barbecue spice and finished with sweet cream butter.

Kentucky Bibb lettuce salad with sliced strawberries, almonds and goat cheeses, dressed with cider vinaigrette.

Sweet and savory corn pudding.

Country cassoulet, a thick stew of braised chicken, duck, black-eyed peas, country ham and vegetables.

Roast chicken breast, topped with Kentucky shiitake mushroom cream sauce.

Beef roast from Green River Cattle Co.

Western Kentucky style pole beans, with fried onions and hickory-smoked ham hocks.

Cheese plate featuring Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese.

Desserts such as sugar cookies decorated with colors of silks worn by Derby jockeys ("So you can bet on your cookie," suggested Logan) and Woodford pudding.

Gil Logan prepared a Kentucky Bibb lettuce salad.
(By Kylene Lloyd, The Courier-Journal)

His Bibb lettuce salad is a case in point. "That wonderful limestone Bibb is both buttery and crisp," he said. "The strawberries add a sweetness, and almonds give a textural crunch. The goat cheese is salty and rich, and the cider dressing gives it just a little sour tang. So a simple country dish gets fancy. You can't really have 'gourmet country'; that's an oxymoron. But you can do fancy country, and that's what we'll be serving."

Among those fancy country dishes is a variation on a classic French stew, a country cassoulet. "What I did was take a 14th-century French dish and I Kentucky-fied it. Instead of just white beans, I use black-eyed peas. I use country ham, which is just as good as, if not better than, European ham like Serrano. And I splash in a little bourbon too."

Logan discovered one of his desserts at a Bardstown bourbon festival.

"The Woodford pudding is a kind of spice cake, but I use Windstone Farms blackberry jam. I don't like real sugary desserts. When you bite in, first you taste the blackberry, then you get a little sense of the bourbon, and then maybe the sweetness kicks in."

Logan estimates that his staff will serve about 20,000 people in the dining rooms on the fourth through sixth levels of the terrace boxes and suites. He will have more than 100 other chefs assisting with the preparation and service, but he expects to plate the queen's lunch himself.

"We understand that she wants to experience what we experience," Logan said. "She wants to see the Derby Kentucky-style."

Reporter Ron Mikulak can be reached at (502) 582-4618.



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